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C O N F I D E N T I A L KINSHASA 000465

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [ECON](#) [PREL](#) [BE](#) [CT](#) [CG](#)
SUBJECT: LOCAL REACTION TO ARREST OF JEAN-PIERRE BEMBA IS
MUTED, BUT THE MUSIC IS NOT OVER.

Classified By: DCM S.BROCK FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (SBU) The arrest in Brussels late May 24 of opposition leader Jean-Pierre Bemba appears to have taken the Congolese government and people by surprise. Little had appeared in the local media prior to the arrest regarding the ICC's investigation into alleged criminal actions in 2002 by Bemba's forces in support of Central African Republic leader Ange-Felix Patasse. We sense that many of the Congolese who were aware of the ICC investigation were skeptical Bemba would be indicted or, if indicted, ever arrested.

¶2. (C) Clearly Bemba himself was not aware of how advanced the ICC case against him was. On May 22 he called Ambassador Garvelink from Brussels to request Embassy Kinshasa's intervention vis-a-vis the GDRC to ensure his safety when he returned to the Congo (which, he said, was planned for the near future). He also asked Ambassador Garvelink to call the U.S. ambassador in Brussels to request that Bemba be issued a visa to visit the U.S., noting that he had been turned down last week and this was probably due to the fact that the ambassador in Brussels did not understand how important Bemba was and why he should be given a visa. Ambassador demurred on both requests.

¶3. (U) There was concern in Congolese political circles and among diplomatic missions immediately after the arrest that Bemba supporters might take to the streets of Kinshasa, a city that voted heavily for Bemba in the 2006 presidential elections. In fact, there were no signs of increased tension in Kinshasa the day after the arrest (Sunday, May 25), but this may have been due to the fact that supporters were caught off guard and because it is difficult to organize events on Sundays, when most Congolese attend religious services. Nonetheless, MONUC increased surveillance in the city and RSO sent text messages to Mission employees to urge avoidance of crowds and the adoption of a prudent security posture. This message was repeated to U.S. citizens resident in the Congo via the consular warden system. No incidents directly related to Bemba's arrest were reported.

¶4. (SBU) On Monday, May 26, a car with Europeans was stoned by a crowd in the vicinity of the National Stadium. No one was injured. MONUC continued with stepped up surveillance and RSO again urged embassy employees to avoid crowds and maintain good security practices. Print and electronic media gave the arrest high-profile coverage. Most stories confused the Bemba arrest in Belgium under the aegis of the ICC with DRC-Belgium bilateral issues (report on the latest crisis in DRC-Belgian relations will follow septel). Embassy also received reports that Bemba supporters were meeting to plan demonstrations or other actions over the coming days to protest the arrest. Except for the car stoning, no incidents were reported. RSO, after consulting with ambassador and DCM, decided not to advise Mission parents to keep their children home from school on Tuesday.

¶5. (SBU) Tuesday, May 27 developments in connection with Bemba's arrest on Tuesday were insignificant. A rally at the

national legislature was attended by a small crowd (estimated at 800-1,500 persons). Instead of marching from the legislature to the Belgian embassy as announced (a distance of approximately 3 kilometers), rally leaders did not ask demonstrators to march and the event fizzled out an hour or so after it began. At Mission's weekly country team meeting, RSO again reminded staff to carry hand-held radios at all time and to avoid crowds.

¶6. (C) Comment: It is still too soon to know if public reaction to the Bemba arrest will remain muted or if momentum will build in coming days for protest leading, perhaps, to social unrest and violence. We sense that there is not much popular support for Bemba per se, but the volatile mixture of political uncertainty and rising prices for food and fuel could combust. Bemba's lieutenants will be in a position to decide whether they want to act responsibly or instead hitch their cart to economic grievances and risk unleashing a process they, or the Government could no longer control. We will monitor and report on developments. End comment.
GARVELINK